

# FORMATS 3

## Nocturnal portrait of the *femme fatale*

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Agamemnon: *It does not suit a woman to be combative.*

Clytemnestra: *Yet it suits greatness also to accept defeat.*

Agamemnon: *Why, here's a battle! What would you not give to win?*

Clytemnestra: *Yield! You are victor: give me too my victory.*

Aeschylus (1)

Film noir, a universe constructed in the shadow of the Apollonian paradise of classicism, shuns the optimistic brightness of comedies, musicals or adventure films, scorns the transparency of the telling of the Hollywood tale, despises the spectator who forgets about the solid frame of the screen and transgresses all established canons in tense but stylised fashion. And so the seaworthy ship of classical narration drifts off into an enigmatic ocean: with no compass bearings to guide the characters, the hero wanders sad, tired, hidden behind stern masks (whether Humphrey Bogart's craggy features or Robert Mitchum's uncertain gaze). The male archetype, off guard, is shown stripped of its usual energy, now a common insurance salesman —Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*—, now a dubious tramp, like John Garfield in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. What man has been more of a nobody than the Edward G. Robinson of *Scarlet Street* or more insecure than the Joseph Cotten of *Niagara*?

In a place, then, where there is no room for the solar hero, female figuration takes the initiative in the story, seizes the dark kingdom of *film noir* and broadens the blurred morality of the genre: seducers, frauds, killers with a kiss, they also block off any attempt at a linear plot and ruthlessly hurl the hero towards a desolate dead end. As an iconographic example of that quick sketch, let us take the opening sequence of *Dead Reckoning* (1947), one of the masterpieces of the genre directed by John Cromwell, in which the protagonist is presented, before we even see his face, as a blurred shape roaming the wet streets of a big city, lost. Indeed, in a plot opening where the spectator has no idea of the reason for this perpetual wandering, Cromwell stops the protagonist for a moment to show, for the first time, the lined face of Humphrey Bogart. It is no accident that the director portrays the image of the character staring blankly at a huge

shop window full of sophisticated women's hats and conceals Bogart among the girls admiring the fashion accessories. He is hiding behind an oval glass pane, so that the male figure is literally dwarfed by a female universe, trapped and threatened by that circle, encircled, in short, as revealed at the end of the film, by the destructive power of the *femme fatale*, which dominates the protagonist's uncertain fate.

Indeed, the *femme fatale* uses the whole female world of appearances to deploy her devastating power: behind an initially friendly appearance, a host of *angel faces* —Jean Simmons, but also Gene Tierney in *Leave Her to Heaven* or Jane Greer in *Out of the Past*— anxiously delay the moment to show their dark side, the devastating part that overturns any domesticated feature. But the ambiguity of each gesture reigns supreme among these creatures, always ambivalent, always surprising, as expressed in the image of Gloria Grahame's split face in *The Big Heat* where, a sibylline courtesy by Fritz Lang, the scarred side is the character's impulse to good.

Such insistence on the exaltation of an ambivalent face shows the real power of features that are governed according to the situation. Perhaps the most famous case is Joan Bennett in *The Woman in the Window* in the sequence when, whilst trying to poison a greedy blackmailer, she uses female strategies to seduce him sweetly, but when he turns his back on her, tenses all the muscles of her face, as if responding in a slightly equivocal way to the acting demands of a far off silent cinema.

*Angel Face* (1953) is the title of Otto Preminger's film which predisposes the spectator to allow himself to be enticed by Jean Simmons' heavenly face as she portrays the devilish character of Diane Tremayne. A true fallen angel, Diane, her very name contains the attributes of the huntress goddess, vengeful and combative: the protagonist's warlike heart beats to carry out a minutely detailed plan to remove her father's new wife. In order to get rid of her stepmother, Diane uses Frank Jessup (Robert Mitchum), the latest prey she has caught with the wiles of a *femme fatale*. Frank, a failed ambulance driver, allows himself to be dazzled by Diane's enchanting magic and, with his disconcerted gaze, thinks he can lend a hand with the plot woven by the goddess-enchantress. For Diane, a refined strategist, handles Frank with the ruse of making him believe that he can return to the successful career as a racing driver which he had to abandon with the outbreak of war. The context is no accident: all *film noir* heroes have an active past full of promise and projects which are shattered by the outbreak of World War Two, so that clearly marked male routes are irreversibly cut off, which twists their energetic spirit into a laconic, passive attitude. Diane, the bearer of Frank's greatest desire, restores some of his strength, but exploits his sleepy lassitude to guide that vigour towards her own particular goals. That is how that weakening of masculinity awakens a femininity that aspires to possess something more than a tidy home. With the departure *en masse* of haughty patriarchs to the ranks of the army, those women saw an opportunity to go in search of material goods and, in a sudden return to past habits (that figuration of the *vamp* from the beginnings of cinema: black satin, sleek hair, long cigarettes) become poisonous lures in circular ballrooms. Those liberated women, those indispensable goddesses of luxurious shrines at the service of idleness and corruption, prefer to be with men who, far from the battlefield,

make a fortune from the losses of the war. And so, tied to corrupting masters, they are used to attract enfeebled victims. But the *femme fatale* soon learns the language of seduction and, more perverse than they, starts to work on her own account and dreams of dispensing with the exploiting husband. That is the case of Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai* and Lizabeth Scott in *Dead Reckoning*.

The *femme fatale*, whose progress is similar to the gangster —suddenly sidelined by the intrusion of the detective story— does not only accommodate to an idle society; her ambition is to have *the world in her hands*, as Vincent Sherman's film, *The Damned Don't Cry*, illustrates with the boundless ambition of Joan Crawford, who scales the heights of power, precisely among gangsters. As in the case of the hero of the gangster movie, the *femme fatale* attains everything she has set out to, but that easy rise also involves an inevitable fall.

It would seem at this point that the *femme fatale* lacks the strength to lay out a symbolic constellation of her own. On the one hand, her attitudes and ambitions are a logical regenerative response to a corrupt masculinity at a time when the solar hero is in crisis. On the other, Hollywood uses the *femme fatale* as a vessel for the tragic spirit that defined the gangster. It is not just a moral drawing of the rise that demands the fall; it also has more external traits such as humble origins, common manners, disproportionate ambition, unbridled passion, inevitable self-destruction. It is true that the frenetic rhythm of bursts of fire from a machine gun and the puny physique (2) of the gangster have nothing to do with the svelte body which the *femme fatale* uses as a weapon. The question must be asked: is there then an unequivocally female imagery in the deep structure of the murky landscape the genre conjures up? That is why we must now travel the constant settings of *noir*, the untransferable elements that those two-faced creatures have sculpted so clearly and transparently in a dangerously watery, magical and hypnotic universe.

## Stormy Waters

“Gulf City, tropical paradise of the south” are the letters in lights that can be read on top of a building rising above a rainy night city in the first image of *Dead Reckoning*. Gulf is a synonym for abyss, a word that will have a good deal to do with the whole imaginary of the heights that will play such an important part in the denouement for the heroine and other deadly women in *film noir*. We find ourselves, not by chance, in the south, by the sea, in a marine landscape, in a female space. Let us remember: *femme fatale*, but also known as “spider woman” in English-speaking countries, a name that takes us back to the isomorphism between the spider and the octopus —a direct symbol of the lethal nature of the ocean where evil female all-powerfulness reveals itself (3)—, two animals that bind their prey with their killing bonds. That is why the protagonist of *Dead Reckoning*, Coral Chandler (Lizabeth Scott), has two words from the ocean universe inscribed in her name. Likewise, Vivian Sternwood in *The Big Sleep* owes the first syllable of her surname to part of a ship and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* evokes the tragic adventure of the mythological heroine of the same name who ends up drowning herself in the sea when she suspects that her lover will not come back for her.

We might also think of the importance of all the negative symbols of the deep in *The Lady from Shanghai*, where the protagonist is called Circe, the daughter of the Sun and Perse, hence the daughter of the Ocean, who casts spells on the sailors in the *Odyssey* with her potions. And who can forget Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* with her shorts and towel turban seizing the opportunity of a night-time dip in the sea, in the black watery domain, to persuade her lover John Garfield to murder her husband? Or in *Out of the Past* when, in order to plant the first kiss on the hero's lips, the delightful Jane Greer sets a snare with nets laid out in the wind, the hypnotic murmur of the sea, the brilliant moonlight, to spin the deadly fate of Robert Mitchum?

In the last scene of *Criss Cross*, Burt Lancaster may well be the most captivating image of masculinity trapped by the wicked elements of watery femininity: between a soft *femme fatale* and an imperturbable ocean mass, in a house overlooking the sea, he is bound motionless by the embrace of Yvonne de Carlo. Lancaster dies trapped by the *femme fatale* and is also minimised by the majestic presence of the sea which rises dark and threatening behind him.

And so it is between waters that this female figuration shows her strongest grip on the male. Coral Chandler in *Dead Reckoning* also takes advantage of being in a small restaurant on the coast to defy the hero: sitting at a table by an open window giving onto the inevitable seascape, she highlights the image of deadly womanhood with the undulating movement of her hair, which echoes the waves of the stormy sea. Gaston Bachelard makes a useful and subtle comment: “it is clear that it is not the shape of the hair that makes us think of water flowing, but the movement (...) From the moment it undulates naturally, it leads us to think of the image of water” (4). A sinuous movement we find in the hair of Joan Bennett in *Scarlet Street*, Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Gene Tierney in *Leave Her to Heaven*, Ava Gardner in *The Killers* or Yvonne de Carlo in *Criss Cross*. But the most extreme hair undoubtedly frames the face of Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. Presented as a mermaid just emerging from the water, wrapped in a flimsy towel, with an exaggeratedly wavy hairstyle, her locks reach degrees of iconographic improbability in a later scene in which she reveals her full perversity: shown in close up, listening in annoyance, behind dark glasses, to the words of her lover who sensibly prefers not to claim the insurance money that has driven them to murder her husband. Phyllis has been deeply ambiguous until that moment; now her hair is modelled, sculpted one might say, on either side of her face like two mermaid's tails; she takes off the dark glasses and, revealing her small watery eyes, gives her lover a hard, cold stare and, in a steady voice which seems to come from the depths of the sea in her entrails, says: “And nobody's pulling out. We went into it together and we're coming out at the end together. It's straight down the line for both of us, remember.” A threat that almost petrifies her shocked lover and makes us think of Barbara Stanwyck as a made-in-Hollywood resuscitator of the monstrous figure of the gorgon Medusa who had snakes for hair and petrified her enemy with her stare (5).

Should we recall the sexual dimension, mentioned by Freud, which has always been bestowed on thick hair in the field of psychoanalysis? In her study on women's hair (6)

in poetry and painting, the historian Erika Bornay brings out the symbolic relation that has always existed between thick hair and sexual potency, an association, she says, which is essentially seductive in love poetry. Waves in the hair, but also in the bodies that put on tight dresses to emphasise the watery movement of feminoid seduction. Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara* (1953) is the unquestionable paradigm that breaks with the vamp in black satin mode to display sinuous flesh in a fuchsia dress—in Technicolor—which drives her husband to a violent bout of jealousy. In Henry Hathaway's film the oceanic figuration manifests itself violently in the shape of the waterfalls that imprison the protagonist. George Loomis (Joseph Cotten) is presented at the beginning of the film as an almost invisible dot between the rushing waters. His words could not be more eloquent: "Why should the falls drag me down here at five o'clock in the morning? To show me how big they are and how small I am? To remind me they can get along without any help? All right, so they've proved it. But why not? They've had ten thousand years to get independent. What's so wonderful about that? I suppose I could too, only it might take a little more time."

Miniaturised by the greatness of femininity, Joseph Cotten rails at that oceanic figuration which, as we have seen, impregnates so many corners of *film noir*. But as the ceaseless roar of the cataract shows, watery monstrosity also has a voice to encircle and subdue the male. Or is the tyrannical nature of the *femme fatale* not inseparable from the word that frees? And the precise grammar she uses to embroil her prey is not her only tool; aware of tones that can hypnotise, her song can be compared to the voice of the Sirens. Pilar Pedraza: "The Siren's songs are charged with deadly meanings, invitations to death, the accents of the grave, and, like the riddle of the Sphinx, are deceits, magical snares set by death for men through an attractive monster with a virginal face and hooked claw." (7)

## The Siren Song

In *The Woman in the Window* Edward G. Robinson is caught up in a complicated plot that leads him to meet a beautiful woman and kill an important financier until he wakes up and realises that he has been dreaming. But a few minutes before going to sleep, the protagonist, who leads a life which is as tedious as it is peaceful, picks up a book by Solomon, *The Song of Songs*, no doubt the inspiration for the sinuous adventure he is drawn into. Like that lyric poem, *film noir* is impregnated with a voluptuous breath which comes from an exacerbated exaltation of the whole universe of the senses (let us not forget that in this case everything starts with the organ of sight, as we see from Edward G. Robinson's fascination with the painted image of Joan Bennett at the beginning of the film). In *Dead Reckoning*, for example, the scent of jasmine overpowers the protagonist just before he is beaten up—close, then, to the *femme fatale*—and in *Double Indemnity* the scent of honeysuckle is the repeated motif that confirms to the hero that he is a dead man. But it is the organ of hearing that places the trusting Hollywood heroes in the greatest danger: how can they not respond to that deep voice, to the enigmatic (8) word, to the probing question that comes from the *femme fatale*? What can they do but revere the exquisite lies that Phyllis, Diane Tremayne or Coral Chandler fire at them between embrace and kiss? Is not the wave of

hair that falls over Veronica Lake's eye in *This Gun For Hire* even more suggestive than her hypnotic songs? And the clearest case: how not to be lost in Rita Hayworth's velvet voice as she sadly caresses the words of "Amado mio" or belts out the explosive song "Put the blame on Mame"?

At the request of Rip Murdock, Coral Chandler in *Dead Reckoning* sings "Either it's love or it isn't", because the hero needs reassuring that this is the woman loved by Johnny, his murdered friend whose corpse is lying in the morgue: "I wanted to see her the way Johnny had. I wanted to hear that song of hers with Johnny's ears." To investigate the mysterious death, Rip Murdock has to put himself in his friend's skin and use his ears to identify the *femme fatale*. Likewise, when Rip hears Coral Chandler's voice he forms his image of her. More than that: having just entered a bar with sea motifs painted on the walls, he sits at the counter and, glass in hand, hears a captivating woman's voice. Instead of turning towards her, he keeps looking ahead. Little by little he raises his eyes and innocently looks at her long legs; then his gaze rises to the belt that encircles her sterile belly and comes to rest on a buckle of glass beads shaped like a butterfly, "symbol of lightness and inconstancy, also herald of the death of someone close"(9). Rip goes up to her, gives her a light and speaks the first words to her: "Cinderella with the deep throat", he says, referring to her impenetrable voice. Rip will never be able to break free, like the butterfly she wears on her belly, of the destructive designs of the *femme fatale*.

Only the significant jewel found in *The Killers*, 1946, outdoes the symbolic trace of the butterfly in *Dead Reckoning*: This is no more nor less than a brooch carved in the shape of a spider pinned to the lapel of Kitty Collins' (Ava Gardner) dress. Because of that stolen jewel, Kitty is found out by a policeman, who immediately arrests her, but she spins the perfect web so that Swede (Burt Lancaster), her faithful lover, takes the rap and does the three years she should have been sentenced to. Swede finds that "spider woman" in an earlier scene which could well be considered the iconographic paradigm of the male hypnotised by a voice: he meets Kitty at a private party, sheathed in black satin, sitting at a piano about to sing "The more I know of love" and in a few seconds she has become the focus of the hero's dazzled gaze. Sure of her prey, Kitty turns her back: unrequited desire is perfectly represented in that gesture. The sequence, a marvel of Hollywood *savoir faire*, turns into a tense ceremony between the music that emerges from her lips and Swede's gaze, lost in the attempt to pin down the shifting song of the *siren*. Robert Siodmak encloses them in a single shot, a motionless frame that holds the two characters violently: she with her haughty stare out of field, he revering her beauty with a lamp between them, a single flame of passion that trembles a few inches from them both and pitilessly lights up the tragic destiny of the hero's passion.

"Do you want a piece of advice? Stop listening to those golden harps, Swede. They'll bring you plenty of trouble..." Those are the words a friend speaks to him years later when he senses that the hero is mixed up in a dangerous robbery just to be near Kitty. More than that: in harsh harmony with his words, Swede never lets go of a handkerchief with a golden harp embroidered in the middle; a gift from Kitty, it is a sign of the misfortune that dogs the hero throughout the film, the object that arouses

the police's interest in Swede's lifeless body.

In *Angel Face* it is music once again, this time the notes played by Diane Tremayne, that are the call of death for Frank Jessup. After rescuing her stepmother from a mysterious accident, the protagonist is about to leave the mansion when a funereal piece of music, the acoustic disguise of the *femme fatale*, makes him turn back and see the face of the creature who is calling him. They are the same bars that later accompany the sinister plan Diane has woven to kill her stepmother: the protagonist plays the lethal melody, knowing that her victim is heading for the garage to take out the booby-trapped car. But Diane, seated at the piano, does not realise that she is also offering her father up to sacrifice since, random stroke of tragedy, he gets into the car with his wife. Diane *binds* all those moments together with the music she plays as if carrying out a ritual: the ambivalent symbol of the bond, the tie which, for Gilbert Durand, characterises the divinities of death, giving them the power to bind or to loose the thread of fate, is replaced here by the invisible thread of music. But let us not forget that *binding*, symbolically, is close to *looking*: Diane shares with the divinities of death the mastery of the bond, the power to tie or untie with the magic of her gaze, as we see in the scene before the car accident in which she throws a small object over a cliff, following with an attentive eye the route her victim is to take later in the car. There is no doubt that Diane's gaze is the primordial element that irremediably links her victim's destiny to death, but it is the music that confirms her power as officiating siren, the *binder*, and which accompanies her victims to the dark kingdom of death.

When the *femme fatale* has no musical gifts, the juke boxes that crop up in so many bars in *film noir* help to fulfil the same mesmerising function. In *Fallen Angel* the lovers that cluster round Linda Darnell gather at the machine to play her favourite tune and, when she is not there, the same mechanical music brings back her voluptuous breath to them. Likewise, in *Niagara* Marilyn Monroe uses a portable vinyl record to listen to and hum along with "Kiss me", the theme that enables her to think of her lover when she is with her husband. Later, when no voice can emerge from her strangled corpse, the cathedral bells chime out the same song, showing, to her husband's despair, that she has been transported through music to the side of her lover, also murdered.

And, in the most extreme case, Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street* (1945) discovers that his fiancée has a lover at the very moment when a vinyl disc is playing, accompanying the embraces of the young couple. But the record is scratched and repeats the same musical phrase over and over. Joan Bennett needs no more siren songs to inveigle the hero who, fatally, takes the coldest weapon —an ice pick— and cold-bloodedly stabs the mocking body he thought he loved. But Edward G. Robinson — having accused the lover of the murder and sent him unscrupulously to the electric chair — is plunged in a sea of remorse and hounded to the end of his days by the voices of the two vanished lovers. Like the worn out music that came from that prophetic, scratched vinyl record, the words of love heard when he discovers them are repeated tirelessly in Robinson's head: disconcerted, he is trapped in a past that is constructed every time a phrase begins again.

## Destroying a Home

In the same film, *Scarlet Street*, the iconography of the domestic space becomes a model, ideal for a study of the home those female vampires run. An image, an insert by Fritz Lang, sums up those creatures' inherent slovenliness: a pile of plates stacked in a sink which is also the target-ashtray for a cigarette end the protagonist carelessly throws from a considerable distance. The apartment where Kitty March (Joan Bennett) lives is always untidy, with clothes scattered around on the floor. Lying or sprawling for most of the film on a bed that shines with an apparent virginal whiteness, Kitty wanders round a small space, always awaiting her lover.

The inversion of the classic canons takes shape once again: the home setting in Hollywood has always been relegated to the care and order of domestic femininity, a refuge for adventurers which becomes their anchorage in the world, the place of the eternal return the hero dreams of at a distance. The home, the heart of warmth kept intact by the intimacy of the family circle, has nothing to do with Kitty March's messy apartment. But the *femme fatale*, aware that the male's wish is to construct that family circle, overflows with promises of eternal love and, queen of deceit, expresses affection for those conservative traditions, as shown by the engagement ring which Linda Darnell sighs for in *Fallen Angel*, whilst the incisive phrase "I want a home" emerges repeatedly from her lips. Just for that everyday dream Dana Andrews will marry a rich heiress to start a new life with Darnell shortly afterwards. But it is not easy to build a home on corrupt foundations, and the protagonist, who has robbed or killed for love, soon mistrusts the person who has driven him to commit the crime. We might think, for example, of the lovers in *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, who end up showing signs of schizoid behaviour, increasingly incomprehensible as the film goes on. Perhaps the most extreme case is *Criss Cross*, 1949, in which Ana (Yvonne De Carlo) leaves her first home —with her first husband (Burt Lancaster)— and marries a gangster who has got rich. Later she returns to her first husband, but at the end of the film, in a small house by the sea, she decides to ditch him and leave him to the vengeful bullets of her second husband: "You have to watch out for yourself" are her words, whilst Lancaster, wounded, immobilised, lost, realises at that instant the full extent of the mean streak in the woman he has loved. The protagonist in *Dead Reckoning* finds himself in a similar situation: when Rip Murdock finds out that Coral Chandler has tried to kill him and before she can make up a new story, tired of so much deceit he confronts her with a phrase that acutely sums up that anxiety or mistrust involved in living with a *femme fatale*: "I can't forget I might die tomorrow, and what if one day you get mad at me because I leave the top off the toothpaste tube?"

"I'm the marrying type", Coral said to the troubled hero in an early sequence, when he needed some certainties about the killing of his friend Johnny. Marrying, for the *femme fatale*, is a way of misleading —of escaping, in this case, from an insidious interrogation—, of building a new mask: the home, for the vamp, is a power structure, a place where she can spin her new webs and stock her weapons. Significantly, in the



same film Coral discovers the home ideal at the moment when they go to the apartment of a friend of Rick's to pick up some weapons. Amidst the artillery all around her — machines guns, hand grenades, knives and swords— she claims enthusiastically that she likes that home a lot. If we understand the *femme fatales'* homes as fortresses where they can store swords and guns, even though they are hung with mirrors, jewellery and gowns, it is no surprise that the closed space does not irritate them as much as the heroines who were precursors of the *femme fatale* in the cinema: Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Nana or Effi Brest. In both cases adultery becomes a liberating action, but desire in Coral Chandler, Phyllis, Kitty March or Kitty Collins is not so much passionate as material, and the home, in the modern context, is a sign of wealth, a power to be kept. Far from being a prison, the traditional home is destroyed and can become a recreation centre, as for Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat*, or the origin of a big company as in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*. Fortresses, then, where there is no place for frailty and still less for breast-feeding babies. Thus we understand that Hitchcock's Rebecca, one of the most terrible *femmes fatales* (perhaps because she is always lurking off screen, stretching out her destructive arms from beyond the grave), did not want anyone to know, even after her death, about the weakness that annihilates her —a cancer— and that her faithful Mrs Danvers, once the truth has come to light, decides to burn down the home that still kept Rebecca's presence alive. Mrs Danvers, the arm that executes Rebecca's designs, destroys the house before the new Mrs de Winter can turn Manderley into a happy, fruitful place, a space that will wipe out the magic dominion of the *femme fatale*.

### To Die like a Man

In *Angel Face* a bout of hysteria by the protagonist —who knows whether because the stepmother has nearly died or because she has failed to do so— drives the nurse Frank Jessup to shake and slap her to calm her down. She grows quiet, stares him in the eye and without a moment's hesitation gives him a tremendous backhander with all her strength behind it. Likewise Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat* needs to throw in Lee Marvin's face the same boiling coffee which in an earlier scene she has received at his hands. The stormy relationship between Burt Lancaster and Yvonne De Carlo in *Kiss of Death* is defined by a series of often insignificant arguments, in which she has to have the last word. Perhaps the most famous case is in *Clash by Night* (1952), in which Fritz Lang presents Barbara Stanwyck as the mover of events in a dangerous love triangle: in a scene which has the sea as background, Robert Ryan offers her a cigarette which he has lit with his own, in a gesture of confident seduction, but she throws it scornfully away, not allowing her lover to be sure that he has won her heart (10).

That belligerent attitude, which exhibits the struggle those creatures put up to reach an equal relationship with the males, is one of the features which, unlike what one might think, empower the heroes of *noir* for totally opposing reasons. In his essay on masculinity and *film noir* Frank Krutnik gives great importance to the fact that in the first part of *Dead Reckoning* Humphrey Bogart gives Coral Chandler a man's nickname. Krutnik reckons that with that gesture the protagonist is trying “to solve the problem of sexual difference”, and that is how Bogart “feels most secure when he can

transform the woman into a man.”(11) Indeed Rip Murdock needs Coral Chandler to lose her lethal feminoid attributes in order to reduce her with weapons he knows, weapons from a masculine universe: to give Coral the nickname Mike for Rip is to assure himself that no likeable feature of the sex of the *femme fatale* can dazzle him or annihilate him as a hero.

But in the last scene of the film Rip carries that *transformation* to its logical conclusion in a perverse attempt to have her die like a man. Whilst Coral is lying in a hospital bed, her head shaved, swathed in white purifying bandages, with no chance of bewitching him with her hair, she asks him in a quavering voice to take her hand and begs for company before she dies. Coral tells him she is afraid of dying and asks him to put her in his pocket. And Rip likens her to a brave man, like the parachutists who fought with him in the war: she is “going out the jump door. You’ll have plenty of company, Mike. High-class company.” Coral closes her eyes and Rip speaks a word —*Geronimo*— which is the very one the soldiers used to say when they jumped out of a plane. The final image of the film: a parachute, certainly Coral’s, floats slowly down from the sky.

And so Rick imposes the most terrible punishment on her: to die without splendour, with the desire not to strive for greatness but to miniaturise her body. She is allowed no make-up and no gown, the sexuality of her hair is torn away, no music comes from her lips and she says her goodbye in a quavering voice. With no magic power, with no deadly attraction, she does not die like a *femme fatale*; she simply dies like a man.

### Nocturnal *femme fatale*

Simply like a man, but perhaps like a nocturnal man. Nothing to do, then, with the diurnal hero, the solar warrior, the defender of the universe of patriarchy which, according to Gilbert Durand, takes up weapons precisely against the archetype of the *femme fatale*, one of the faces of time, perfidious sign of the human clock. But having reached the point where we can state that there is a feminine imagery behind the *femme fatale*, why not also consider the possibility that there might be an imagery in those creatures that responds to the rule of night, linked to matriarchy, where the antidote to time is not to be found in taking up weapons but in capturing the vital forces of the future?

Little by little: if we return to the figuration of the descent and look inside the *noir* genre, it is clear that the image of Coral Chandler leads us to other fallen corpses such as Jean Simmons in *Angel Face* (who hurtles towards a deadly cliff with glasses, champagne and her out-of-love lover) or Agnes Moorehead in *Dark Passage* (who hurls herself out of the window of a high rise apartment block before her criminal guilt is exposed). In an expression of Bachelard, dynamic images “reveal fulminating time”(12), that faceless time so characteristic of the daytime world: so is the *femme fatale* only linked to the diurnal imaginary?

Note: as we have said Coral Chandler descends from the sky, but slowly. She descends

and in her extreme slowness she is far from the headlong rush of the fall. Gilbert Durand contrasts those two different speeds in the rule of night, because in the rule of night, the rule of euphemism, people seek an antidote to the passage of time and, clearly inverting values in a way peculiar to that imaginary, it is confirmed that “the axis of descent is an intimate, fragile, delicate one”, where they fall “to go back in time and return to the calm before birth.”(13) Coral Chandler’s last wish is not, in spite of Rip Murdock’s desire, “to die like a man”, but to miniaturise herself slowly (“all small things need slowness”, Bachelard says (14). In her desire for reduction, she wants to be “in the sweet warmth of the closed regions which is the first sign of intimacy.” (15) Is it not, then, a search for an intimate, night-time space that claims Coral Chandler in the end? In the headlong falls of Jean Simmons and Agnes Moorehead there was a clear decision to die in the daytime, in action, like the solar hero who never stops to contemplate the precise moment of his own death. In the same way, although it is not a literal fall, that structure is reproduced in Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (in a car travelling at full speed she has a shootout with the law) or, in more exemplary fashion, Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*, reflected in the labyrinth of mirrors which imprison her, takes aim at her husband, who is also holding a gun, and, firing against the clock, does not have a moment to glance at her fragmented, moribund face.

At the moment of her death, Coral Chandler is distanced from those heroic diurnal undertakings and says goodbye without a struggle (even accompanied by her sexual opposite) in a gesture of concentrated will to accomplish an *intimate, fragile, delicate* fall. *Femme fatale*, nocturnal in the end, she seeks, though only at the moment she draws her last breath, the intimate treasure that reconciles her to her own death. But she is not the only one. Others try for a similar figuration: we think of Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*, when her calm, understanding, delicate face in a slowly descending lift contrasts with the fact that she is heading for certain death in jail. And we cannot forget the strange peace that emanates from Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat* at the moment of her death, after dragging from Glenn Ford’s entrails the secret of the nocturnal femininity she has pursued so eagerly. Nor should we scorn the two sublime moments which belong to Barbara Stanwyck in the last, almost identical, images of *Double Indemnity* and *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, two deaths in which the woman traces a hot line —a clearly *delicate* gesture— which seeks, in the warm contact of the lover’s gun, a deep feeling of devotion.

Yes: as we have seen in the turbulent landscape of *noir* there is an imagery, but also an imaginary, which is unmistakably feminine. Beyond the dangerously diurnal universe, watery, magical and hypnotic, of the *femme fatale*, Lizabeth Scott, Mary Astor, Gloria Grahame and Barbara Stanwyck show that the deadly woman can also boast a nocturnal dimension that can transmute Cronos into a beneficent talisman.

## Notes

(1) Aeschylus, Agamemnon, in *The Oresteian Trilogy* (translated by Philip Vellacott), Penguin Classics, 1956, p. 75.

- (2) Stuart M. Kaminsky: *American Film Genres* . He points out that the paradigmatic actors who embodied the figure of the gangster, such as Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, were rather short and quite “ordinary” physically. According to the author that was a way of allowing the audience to identify with the characters: if that little guy can do it, why can't I be a gangster too?
- (3) Gilbert Durand: *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire. Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*. Bordas, Paris, 1970.
- (4) Gaston Bachelard: *L'eau et les rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la Matière*.
- (5) Those sculpted curls of the protagonist of *Double Indemnity* which recall snakes are very similar to the ones described by Swinburne when, basing his idea on Michaelangelo's female heads, he created the icon of the 19th century femme fatale. See Mario Praz.
- (6) Erika Bornay: *La cabellera femenina*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1994, p. 56.
- (7) Pilar Pedraza, *La bella, enigma y pesadilla (Esfinge, Medusa, Pantera...)*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1991, p.118.
- (8) Seductive, false and wicked, the word spoken by the *femme fatale* is *enigmatic*, insofar as the word is never what it appears, as happens with the figure of the Sphinx, emissary of death. In Ana Iriarte's thesis, she not only questions and confuses the male; she destroys him directly. See Ana Iriarte, *Las redes del enigma. Voces femeninas en el pensamiento griego*, Taurus, Madrid, 1990, p 32.
- (9) Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*.
- (10) Who knows if Fritz Lang was responding to Paul Henreid's gesture in *Now Voyager* (1942), where the hero takes two cigarettes out of the packet in his jacket pocket and lights them simultaneously on numerous occasions throughout the film: one for his new lover, Bette Davis, who takes it gratefully, and one for himself. Here Bette Davis, unlike Barbara Stanwyck, gladly accepts her suitor's servile gesture.
- (11) Frank Krutnik: *In a lonely street. Film noir, genre, masculinity*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 172.
- (12) Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, José Corti, Paris, 1947, p. 353.
- (13) Gilbert Durand, op. cit., pp. 191-193.
- (14) Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*.

(15) Gaston Bachelard, op., cit, p. 190.

